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Introduction: Historiography of the Humanities

RENS BOD

This volume brings together scholars and historians who share a common goal: to develop a comparative history of the humanities. Although separate histories exist of some single humanities disciplines – such as the history of linguistics or the history of history writing – we feel that a general history of the humanities would satisfy a long-felt need and fill a conspicuous gap in intellectual history.

In the field of the history of the natural sciences, overviews have been written at least since the nineteenth century (e.g. William Whewell's well-known *History of the Inductive Sciences*). It may thus be surprising that no such history exists for the field of the humanities. The lack of such a history constituted one of the major motivations for organizing the *First International Conference on the History of the Humanities: The Making of the Humanities*, held at the University of Amsterdam from October 23rd to 25th, 2008. As the first conference of its kind, we felt the need to create sufficient coherence and focused on one period only: *the early modern era*. The Call for Contributions attracted far more papers than could be accommodated: we received 89 submissions, of which only 20 could be accepted. In addition to the submitted papers, we had 4 invited talks by Floris Cohen, David Cram, Anthony Grafton and Ingrid Rowland, resulting in a total of 24 papers divided over 3 days. We decided to have no parallel sessions, so that all conferencees could attend each other's talks and participate in the general discussions. By the end of the conference, there was an increasing awareness that a general history of the humanities could and should be written.

1 Defining the humanities and their historiography

What are the humanities? It is as with the notion of 'time' in St Augustine's philosophy: if you don't ask, we know, but if you ask, we are left with empty hands. Since the nineteenth century the humanities have typically been defined as those

disciplines that investigate the expressions of the human mind (*Geisteswissenschaften*).¹ Thus, the study of music, literature, language, visual arts all belong to the realm of the humanities, in contrast to the study of nature which belongs to the domain of the natural sciences. And the study of humans in their social context belongs to the social sciences. But these definitions are unsatisfactory. Mathematics is to a large extent a product of the human mind, and yet it is not considered a humanities discipline. A pragmatic stance may be more workable: the humanities are those disciplines that are taught and studied at the various humanities faculties. According to this definition, the humanities usually entail: linguistics, musicology, philology, literary theory, historical disciplines (including art history) as well as more recent disciplines such as film studies and media studies. In some countries theology and philosophy are also taught in humanities faculties, whereas in other countries they constitute faculties on their own.

But why should one wish to separate the history of the humanities from the history of the sciences – rather than aiming at a history of *all* scientific activities, from the natural and the social to the humanistic? The endeavor to write a history of *all* sciences was attempted by George Sarton in the 1930s.² However, the result of his work, which is based on a strongly positivistic concept of progress, does not go beyond the fourteenth century, and even within that period, the humanities occupy a severely marginal position in Sarton's history. Although Sarton includes linguistics and musicology to some extent, he leaves out other humanistic disciplines such as art history and literary theory. According to Sarton, the history of the visual arts (painting, architecture and sculpture) only throws light upon the sciences from 'the outside' and does not contribute to scientific 'progress', in contrast to the study of music.³ Sarton does not elaborate any further on this issue, but it seems that he is pointing to the history of art *itself* rather than art history as a *discipline*. Of course, for a history of the humanities, we need to include both art history and the study of music (musicology). Of these two, Sarton only accepts musicology, mainly because of its importance for scientific progress. There is no attempt to come up with a general history of all sciences in his work, despite Sarton's lofty intentions. After his death, no-one seems to have picked up Sarton's goal.

Both in content and period, the history of the humanities has remained underexposed. This is all the more striking because many histories of the natural sciences were written during the last two centuries.⁴ And more recently, the history of the social sciences has also been taken up.⁵ Thus, from a historiographical point of view, a history of the humanities is dearly missing. While various histories of some *single* humanistic disciplines have been written, such as the history of linguistics⁶ or the history of literary theory⁷, connections between methods and principles in literary theory and those in art history or between musicology and linguistics are rarely made – perhaps because of the notorious fragmentation of the humanities during the last century.



Fig. 1: Egidius Sadeler after Hans von Aachen, *Minerva Introduces Painting to the Liberal Arts*, engraving, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

2 Towards a first history of the humanities: this book

A comparative, interdisciplinary history of the related humanistic disciplines is thus badly needed. But how can we make a selection of such an overwhelming amount of historical material? This collection, which gathers some of the best papers presented at *The Making of the Humanities* conference, wishes to make a start in investigating the comparative history of the various humanistic disciplines. They range from art history to poetics and from musicology to philology in the early modern period. Each paper proposes and elaborates on a different approach to the history of the humanities. These approaches range from *external-istic* (focusing on the socio-cultural context of a discipline or person) to *internal-istic* (focusing on the internal methodologies of a specific discipline). The papers not only cover historiographical overviews, but also make comparisons between disciplines and other sciences. Moreover, each contribution ends with a discussion of the pearls and perils of writing a comparative history of the humanistic sciences – and some of the papers are fully immersed in such a discussion. In this way we also hope that the book will contribute to the methodological problem of writing a history of the humanities.⁸

The first part of the book, entitled ‘**The Humanities versus the Sciences**’, dives directly into some of the methodological issues. It contains three essays that position the humanities in their historical relation with the natural sciences. In the first essay, *Michiel Leezenberg* argues for a worldwide perspective on the history of the humanities, as is becoming common practice in the historiography of the natural sciences. He illustrates his arguments with a case study of the non-European influence on Spinoza and his circle. *Cynthia Pyle*’s essay shows that many bridges existed and still exist between the humanities and the natural sciences: not only did early fifteenth-century scholars like Lorenzo Valla and Leon Battista Alberti use methods that have later been termed ‘scientific’, they often contributed directly to the sciences themselves as well. *Floris Cohen*’s contribution shows that the study of music had humanistic as well as scientific dimensions, both of which were investigated and discussed in the early modern period. He points out that the disruption of the Pythagorean cosmic harmony came about due to developments in the exact sciences and in the humanities alike.

The second part of the book, ‘**The Visual Arts as Liberal Arts**’, starts out with an essay by *Ingrid Rowland* showing that the aim of describing the world was carried out in both the sciences and the humanities, especially in the visual arts. Artists increasingly represented information in a graphic form, like Raphael’s *School of Athens*, where allegory made room for expository habits of thought. The essay by *Marieke van den Doel* further explores the relation between the visual arts and philosophy, in particular Ficino. She shows how Ficino’s varied and frequent

remarks on the supremacy of painting over music were used by art theorists and historians such as Vasari. Ficino effectively wielded a view of the hierarchy of the arts in which scholarship and science were subordinate to beauty. *Thijs Weststeijn's* contribution then investigates the relations between the visual arts and pictography with particular focus on Chinese characters as universally intelligible ideograms. The heated discussions about pictography reveal how seventeenth-century scholars were keen on combining widely different disciplines, bringing together linguistics, art theory, archaeology and political thought.

In part three of the book, entitled '**Humanism and Heresy**', *Hilary Gatti* analyzes Giordano Bruno's concept of metaphor and its impact on the Renaissance.⁹ Bruno's metaphor seems to define what may be 'the humanities' for Bruno as opposed to natural philosophy or science: the universe of words and images through which the mind conducts its search for truth. According to Gatti, Bruno can be seen as attempting to dissolve the orthodox Renaissance tradition of the humanities which tended to stress fidelity to classical rules and models. The essay by *Bernward Schmidt* examines the specific conditions of the humanities in Baroque Rome between ca. 1670 and 1760. Most Roman scholars were concurrently members of the Republic of Letters and of the Roman Inquisition or the Congregation of the Index. They had to censor books which they loved to read for their private studies. Schmidt argues that there existed no contradiction between learning and censoring in Baroque Rome.

In part four, '**Language and Poetics**', *Juliette Groenland* examines the pedagogic practice of northern humanists, in particular Murnellius, whose Latin manual for beginners spread as far as Poland and Hungary. She shows how the humanist credo 'morality through orality' was put into practice and how the humanist reformers created independent minds vouching for tolerance and emancipation. *Cesc Esteve* reviews the history of early modern literary criticism, showing that the humanist discourse on the *ars poetica* evolved towards more secular and 'scientific' approaches to the literary past. He argues that literary historiography has much in common with the *cognitio historica* as prescribed and practised in history writing in the early modern period. The essay by *Paivi Mehtonen* explores the emergence of the eighteenth-century *Literaturwissenschaft*. She analyzes the German and British conflicts in which the opposing camps gathered the sciences of word on the one hand and the 'solid' studies of objects, perception and thought on the other. She argues that the discipline of *Literaturwissenschaft* emerged decades before the dawn of Romanticism.

Part five, '**Linguists and Logicians**', starts out with an essay by *David Cram* on the changing relations between grammar, rhetoric and music in the early modern period. He discusses language and music from the perspective of philosophical languages and combinatorics. The main thrust of the paper is that the shift of

music from the *quadrivium* to the *trivium* is the result of a complex process that involves all disciplines, and whereby a new division between the humanities and sciences emerges (see also Cohen's contribution). *Jaap Maat* investigates the relations between grammar, logic and rhetoric in early modern Europe. While the upcoming natural sciences were particularly harsh for the disciplines that were traditionally concerned with language, Maat argues that the three disciplines survived the seventeenth century undamaged and that even new approaches to the study of language emerged, which gradually superseded the traditional arts.

In part six, '**Philology and Philosophy**', *Már Jónsson* analyzes philological practice in Northern Europe, showing how insights from fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian humanists were further developed into a new practice on philological, linguistic and historical matters. He shows that some of the methods and ideas developed in these years still retain their validity and have hardly been improved. The essay by *Piet Steenbakkers* explores the circulation of knowledge with respect to Spinoza's role as a philologist and his place in the history of biblical scholarship. Spinoza's interest in the Bible was not strictly philosophical but had strong philological and linguistic penchants, too. Steenbakkers shows how Spinoza played a crucial role in the dramatic decline of the status of the Bible in western civilization. *Martine Pécharman* continues on the issue of philological criticism of the Bible, especially of the New Testament. Focusing on the debate between Simon and Arnauld, she examines the rules of critique in the humanities, which involved linguistics, philology and philosophy.

The last part of the book, '**The History of History**' starts out with an essay by *Jacques Bos* on the development of historiography in early modern Europe. He argues that Machiavelli and Guicciardini created a new mode of historical experience that actually turned the past into an object of study. He compares the historical work of the sixteenth century with other disciplines, in particular philology and philosophy, and maintains that nineteenth-century historicists like Ranke were involved in a very similar project which turned history into an academic discipline. *Wouter Hanegraaff* investigates the historiography of thought which began to emerge during the seventeenth century, as German protestant authors sought to distinguish the history of rational thought from biblical revelation and pagan superstition. Hanegraaff focuses on Jacob Brucker's monumental history of philosophy and argues that his legacy is still with us today: Brucker managed to demarcate the history of philosophy, as based solely upon human reason, from the history of religion.

Together, the seven parts of this book illustrate the width and depth of the history of the humanities in early modern Europe, as well as their mutual intertwining and connection with the exact sciences. The humanities instigated a new secular world view (Steenbakkers, Leezenberg, Hanegraaff, Gatti), they rebutted

forgeries that no-one dared to question before (Pyle, Steenbakkens, Pécharman), and with their standard of *precision, consistency* and *criticism* (Pyle, Jónsson, Rowland, Cohen, Groenland), the humanities deeply influenced the exact sciences (Pyle, Cram, Maat, Cohen). Many papers in this volume also suggest that discipline formation had its roots well before the nineteenth-century development of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (Mehtonen, Esteve, Jónsson, Bos, Hanegraaff). Not only was there a wide circulation of knowledge in the early Republic of Letters (Gatti, Rowland, Schmidt, van den Doel, Groenland, Weststeijn), there was also a far-reaching *institutionalization of disciplines* such as philology, historiography, poetics and the arts (van den Doel, Mehtonen, Steenbakkens, Bos). Their relation with the New Sciences indicates that the humanities not only preceded the sciences but also shaped them to a very large extent via the *formal and empirical study of music, art, language and texts* (Cohen, Rowland, Pyle, Weststeijn, Cram, Maat).

Thus, a comparative history of the humanities sheds new light from both within and outside the humanistic disciplines. Of course, we have focused in this book on only one period in the history of the humanities. The next conference (autumn 2010) and book (planned in 2012) will focus on the subsequent period of this history and relate it to the previous one, that is: the transition from the early modern to the modern period, including influences from outside Europe.

This volume could not have been produced without the success of the original conference, *The Making of the Humanities*, in 2008. A special word of thanks needs to go to two persons who were involved with the conference organization from its start back in 2007: Peter van Ormondt and Karin Gigengack of the ILLC bureau (Institute for Logic, Language and Computation). Without their organizational expertise and support, this book would not be here. We would also like to thank Martin Stokhof who brought this conference to the attention of the European Science Foundation that turned out to be of great help in distributing the Call for Papers. We are indebted to NWO, the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, whose generous funding scheme supports two of the editors. We are grateful to the former Mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen, for receiving all participants on the first conference day in the Mayor's Residence, one of the finest canal houses of Amsterdam. And we thank the University of Amsterdam for making its facilities freely available, as well as the Spui 25 Academic Centre that hosted the public event at the end of the second conference day, entitled *Discoveries in the Humanities that Changed the World*. We are most appreciative of the excellent editorial help we received from Amsterdam University Press in turning the conference papers into the current book. Finally, we wish to thank all conference speakers for their marvelous talks, all session chairs for their beautiful introductions that were often papers on their own, the dean of the Faculty of Humanities José van Dijk for opening the conference with a splendid speech, and

not to forget all participants who actively engaged in the fascinating discussions. They *all* were the persons who turned the conference into a success. They can be found at <http://www.illc.uva.nl/MakingHumanities/program.html>.

Notes

- 1 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften. Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte* (Teubner 1883, reprinted: 1979).
- 2 George Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science, Volume I, II, III* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1931/1947).
- 3 George Sarton, *ibidem*, Volume I, 5.
- 4 Among the many histories of the natural sciences, one of the first is William Whewell, *History of the Inductive Sciences* (three volumes, 1837). Later classics are Stephen Mason, *A History of the Sciences* (MacMillan, 1962); William Dampier, *A History of Science and Its Relation to Philosophy and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1966). Some more recent ones include James McClellan and Harold Dorn, *Science and Technology in World History: An Introduction* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Frederick Gregory, *Natural Science in Western History* (Wadsworth Publishing, 2007).
- 5 Examples of histories of the social or human sciences (not to be confused with the humanities) are Roger Smith, *The Norton History of the Human Sciences* (Norton and Company, 1997); Scott Gordon, *The History and Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction* (Routledge, 1993); Theodore Porter and Dorothy Ross, *The Cambridge History of Science, Volume 7, The Modern Social Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 6 e.g. R.H. Robins, *A Short History of Linguistics* (Longman, 1997).
- 7 e.g. Richard Harland, *Literary Theory from Plato to Barthes* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1999).
- 8 See also Rens Bod, *De Vergeten Wetenschappen: Een Geschiedenis van de Humaniora* ('The Forgotten Sciences: A History of the Humanities') (Prometheus, 2010).
- 9 Gatti's contribution will also appear in her monograph *Essays on Giordano Bruno* (Princeton University Press, 2011). We gratefully acknowledge Princeton University Press for their generous permission to reprint it here.